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THE ODE ON THE KING OF BABYLON,
ISAIAH XIV 4b-21

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The ode is a poem of five pentameter strophes of seven lines each, which, as represented by the context, was to be sung by the Israelites, when the king of Babylon should fall.

The first strophe speaks of the universal joy on earth over the fact that the oppression of a great tyrant had come to an end. The second strophe pictures the surprise in Sheol at the entrance to that land of the lofty king. The third strophe contrasts the heights to which he aspired in the world with his fall to the lowest depths of the pit. The fourth strophe compares the dismay which he had formerly occasioned among the nations with his present condition as one dead, cast out, ignobly slain by the sword. The fifth strophe describes his ignoble end as the penalty of his tyranny and rejoices at the extinction of his race.

This paper sets forth the discussion of the ode as a post-exilic production. What king is meant will also be considered, as well as the author's purpose in writing the ode.

By way of introduction the following notes on the text should be made.

Instead of "how hath the oppressor ceased, the golden city ceased," in the first line of the ode, the reading should be: "how hath the oppressor ceased, the raging ceased," changing מַדְהִבָּה, "golden city," to בִּירֵהֲבָה, "raging." דָּהֵב is Aram., but in Heb. זָהָב equals "gold." On the other hand, רָהֵב, "to rage," occurs several times in the O.T.; cf. Isa. 3:5: וַיִּרְהֹבוּ הַנְּעָרִים בְּזִקְנָם, "the youth rages against the old man." Michaelis was the first modern commentator to call attention to this better reading, and the LXX, Syr., and Targ. all favor it. Cf. the LXX: ἀναπέ-
πανται ὁ ἐπισπauδαστής, "ceased hath the hastening"; Syr.: ܠܡܕܐ, "ceased hath the lordship"; Targ.: סָה תִקּוּהָ חֵיבָא,

"ceased hath the power of evil-doing." The Revised Version recognizés the emendation in the margin.

For the sake of more correct measure we might omit יהוה in the hemistich: "broken hath Yahweh the staff of the wicked," leaving three tone-words before the caesura instead of four. This word may have been inserted in the interest of clearness.

מִרְדָּה, "persecuted," in the fourth line of the strophe, might well be changed to מִרְדָּת, "trampling." מִרְדָּה seems quite impossible on syntactic grounds and the parallelism is much improved by the change. Döderlein first made use of this emendation on a suggestion from the Targ. which has מִפְלָח, "causing to labor." Upon substituting "trampling" for "persecution," we have the parallelism: "which smote peoples in fury with a stroke unceasing; which trampled in anger nations with a trampling unrestrained."

In order to have a construction that conforms with usage, the first three stichs of the second strophe should read: "Sheol from beneath is enraged at thee to meet thy entrance; it stirreth up all the dead, all the rulers of the land; it raiseth up from their thrones all the kings of the nations." The first verb with the fem. subject "Sheol" is conjugated, רִגְזָה, "is enraged"; the two verbs that follow should be infinitives, עִוֵּר, "stirreth up," and הָקִים, "raiseth up," rather than perfects.

In vs. 10, the first half of the poetic line is too short; perhaps some word like אֱלִיךְ has fallen out after the verb יַעֲנוּ, "they respond"; if so, we then have three tone-words כֻּלָּם יַעֲנוּ אֱלִיךְ, "all of them respond to thee," the last half of the line having two tone-words, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֱלִיךְ.

Duhm changes יָצַע, "is spread" in vs. 11 to יָצוּעַ, "couch of." As it appears in the text, the verb יָצַע and the noun רִמָּה, "worm" do not agree in gender; besides, the word פְּכִסְיָה from כִּסָּה, "cover," in the other part of the parallelism, corresponding to יָצַע in this, is a noun. If we adopt this change, the last two lines of this strophe would read: "brought down to Sheol is thy majesty, the music of thy harps; under thee is a couch of worms and thy coverlet is maggots."

The last half of vs. 12, the second stich of the third strophe, has been emended in two ways. After prefixing אֵיךְ, with Budde,

at the beginning of the stich, in order to give it three tone-words in the first half, Gunkel would change גִּרִּים, "nations," to נְפִית, "corpses." Then the stich reads: "how art thou cut down to earth, prostrate among dead bodies"? not "prostrate among nations." Several have pointed out that הִלַּשׁ can be transitive, as in Exod. 17:13: "Joshua prostrated Amalek." So if we follow the LXX and change עַל, "among," to כָּל, "all," we have: "how art thou cut down to earth, prostrator of all nations."

In vs. 17 change עִירָיו, "his cities," to עִירֶיהָ, "her cities," as suggested by Bickell, חֲבַל, "world," the antecedent of the suffix, being feminine. We then read, "who made the world a wilderness, and tore her cities down."

The text of vss. 17b-20a, followed closely, may yield division into six lines as follows, but the fifth strophe will lack one stich: "who loosed not his prisoners for home, all the kings of the nations? All of them lie in honor, each in his house. But thou art cast out of thy grave, as a branch abhorred, with the garment of the slain, those pierced by the sword; those who go down to the stones of the pit, as a corpse trodden down. Thou shalt not [even] be joined with them in burial." Budde and Cheyne think better sense is made by transposing אִישׁ בְּבֵיתוֹ, "each in his house," from the end of vs. 18 to the beginning, changing at the same time בְּבֵיתוֹ to לְבֵיתוֹ and dropping כָּל. In vs. 19, Bickell, Cheyne, Duhm, Gunkel, and Marti agree in the main in taking the words: מִקְבֶּרֶךְ כְּנָצֵר, "from thy grave like a branch abhorred, a garment," out of the middle of the verse and putting them at the end. The fourth strophe then closes as follows: "who loosed not his prisoners for home, each to his house? The kings of the nations all of them, they lie in honor; but thou art cast out among the slain, pierced with the sword, with those who go down to the stones of the pit, as a corpse trodden down."

The words: מִקְבֶּרֶךְ כְּנָצֵר נֶחֱעַב לְבַשׁ, referred to above, make good sense, though forming only parts of two broken lines at the beginning of strophe five: ["how art thou cut off] from thy grave as a shoot? clothed [with shame] . . ."

In vs. 20 which begins: "thou shalt not be joined with them in burial," the antecedent of the suffix "them" is obscure. From the

thought that it was considered an honor for one to be buried by the side of his father and forefathers, some critics have suggested that the phrase אבותיך might properly be inserted at the beginning of the line and the reading be: "thy fathers, thou shalt not be joined with them in burial."

The last stich of the ode בלייקמו וירשו ארץ ומלאו פנייהבל ערים, "that they rise not up and possess the earth and fill the face of the world with cities," contains six tone-words. We might omit ערים, for if we retain it, the lines close tautologically. עיים, "heaps," is perhaps the word to be expected in the place of ערים.

The problem as to the authorship of this ode is one that has received considerable discussion and is still unsolved.

In the thirteenth chapter an oracle appears in which the overthrow of Babylon is predicted. A picture of the advance of the enemy from the distance and of the attack upon the city is set forth. The scene of the siege is drawn at length and in detail. Following the oracle is a brief statement in which the reason for the overthrow of Babylon is given. It is Yahweh's purpose to destroy Babylon, in order to deliver Israel from captivity and to return the people to their own land. Then comes the ode on the fall of the king.

The oracle and the ode are placed together under one title; viz., "burden of Babylon which Isaiah beheld." They appear joined as the two parts of one whole, the oracle, moreover, finding its complement in the ode. The oracle and the ode really give us two views of one event, as it were, obverse and reverse, and it has generally been held that these two poems were the work of the same hand. It appears quite probable, however, owing to the following considerations, that the oracle and the ode were the products of different periods.

The oracle is certainly an exilic composition. The point of view of the composer, throughout the whole oracle, is quite evidently in the exile. The writer is in Babylon; he sees the army approaching from the north; and he seems to be among those who suffer in the carnage which shall make Babylon like Sodom and Gomorrah. He mentions specifically who the enemy is: "the Lord will stir up the Medes." Evidently the author is using the

term "Medes" to denote the Persian Empire. Perhaps the army of Cyrus was already on its march toward Babylon, as the prophet saw the vision in the oracle.

The chief reason for placing the oracle and the ode in different periods is the difference in their literary style, as it is not easy to discover any purely historical point of view in the ode. The oracle has not by any means the perfection of poetic form found in the ode. For example, the oracle cannot readily be reduced by emendation to a pentameter of five seven-line strophes like the ode. There is more irregularity both in the stichs and the strophes. Thus, in the oracle, four out of the seven lines of the first strophe have irregular measure. The first hemistich contains five words, while it should have but three. We can only make three tone-words by joining noun and adjective, also verb and object by *maḳḳeph*, but such joining is not usual. The second hemistich has three tone-words, while it should have but two. In the second line the short hemistich comes before the caesura and the long one after it which is also unusual. The third line has only three words at most, while it should have five. The seventh line, like the second, has the short hemistich before and the long one after the caesura.

As to the ode, the first strophe is a perfect pentameter, without a single irregularity, provided that the one word יְהוָה, which some critics regard as a gloss, be elided from the second line. Examination of the two poems, stanza by stanza, shows the same difference of style throughout, only that, as one approaches the end of the oracle, the lack of regularity in poetic form becomes more apparent, and one finds that there is really not much regard for the pentameter. On the other hand, in the ode, observance of correct measure in almost every line is rather strict.

The two poems exhibit marked dissimilarity in literary expression. The oracle is a composition of high order. The figure of the lifting up of the banner, the noise of the army marching through the mountains, the darkening of the stars of heaven when the catastrophe comes to the city are all striking and beautiful, but there is much that is rather commonplace in the oracle. Thus, we find many expressions that are familiar from use elsewhere: "Yahweh of hosts"; "day of Yahweh"; "destruction from the Almighty";

"wrath and fierce anger"; "make the land a desolation"; "hands feeble"; "the heart of man shall melt"; "pangs and sorrows"; "be dismayed"; "heavens tremble and earth shake"; "thrust through by the sword"; "infants dashed in pieces"; "houses rifled"; "women ravished"; "overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah."

In the ode, on the other hand, there is nothing prosaic; everything is fresh, and the movement never lags from beginning to end. Notice the directness in the terms of the ode and the rapid change of view as the writer moves on to the end of the discourse: "how hath the oppressor ceased"; "the whole earth is at rest"; "how art thou fallen from heaven"; "thou art brought down to Sheol"; "is this the man that made the earth tremble"; "prepare ye slaughter for his children."

The oracle and the ode are quite clearly the products of differently constituted minds. The author of the oracle is contemplative and deliberate, but the author of the ode is animated and in haste. The author of the oracle is a statesman and an observer of social conditions, weaving into his poem what he sees of the struggle for power going on between nations, and giving concrete statement of the political situation of his own time. His heart is touched as he thinks of the cruelty and suffering among the masses that inhabit a great city, particularly among women and children, when attack shall be made by the soldiery of a mighty foe. The author of the ode, however, is a theologian who dwells in the atmosphere of the gods and visits the home of the dead. He makes it a moral and religious point to picture the end of a hated king.

There is much in the ode that makes it appear post exilic, as for example, the vocabulary. Thus, the large proportion of *ἄπαξ λεγόμενα*, of which there are six, would seem to show that the ode was not written in a classical period, namely מִדְּהָבָה, "golden city," vs. 4, or the corrected reading מִרְהָבָה, "raging"; מִדְּרָה, "pursuit," vs. 7, or the corrected reading מִדְּרַח, "trampling"; הַמִּינִיחַ, "music," vs. 11; מִטְּעֵנִי, "those pierced," vs. 19; הַיָּלֵל, vs. 12, or the corrected reading הַיָּלֵל, "shining one"; and מִטְּבַחַה, "slaughter," vs. 21. In Isa. 1:2-20, written before the exile, there are only two *ἄπαξ λεγόμενα*; viz., בִּקְשָׁה, "cucumber patch," vs. 8, and הַמְּזִיץ, "oppressor," vs. 17; in place of הַמְּזִיץ, the LXX,

using *ἀδικούμενον*, suggests *הַמְנוּץ*, "oppressed," which is not *ἀπαξ λεγόμενον*. Isa. 41:1-20, written during the exile, has only one *ἀπαξ λεγόμενον*, *מִצְתָּה*, "thy contention."

Moreover, several words belong only to the later literature of the Old Testament. This fact would seem to fix with certainty the lateness of the production of the ode. Thus, *שָׁגָה*, "gaze at," vs. 16, is used elsewhere only in Ps. 33:14 and Cant. 2:9. *רַפְּאִים*, "the dead," vs. 9, occurs only in the later Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; *בִּשְׁל*, "be like," vs. 10, only in Second Isaiah and Psalms; *נִצֵּר*, "shoot," vs. 19, only in Daniel and the anonymous poetry of Isaiah; *בֹּל*, "not," vs. 21, only in later literature as Ps. 10 and Isa. 40.

There are a few words with a meaning peculiar to late literature. *מִשְׁל* is a Phoenician word and in earlier literature means simply "ruler," while here it means "tyrant." *הִלַּשׁ* in earlier literature means "to prostrate"; in later literature "to be prostrate." *עֲלִיזָה* in earlier literature means "most high"; in later literature "the most high" (cf. use in Apocrypha). *בֵּית* in vs. 18 means "grave," as in Eccl. 12:5.

Not only the vocabulary, but the allusions point to a post-exilic authorship. Notice first the reference to the myth of the mountain of the gods, known to be common to several nations, in which the gods are conceived of as dwelling in the heights of the cloud-capped mountain. In this ode the king is pictured as having said in his heart that he would ascend into the heavens, set his throne above the stars, be seated on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north in the heights of the cloud and be equal to the Most High. This, the most elaborate reference in the Old Testament to a legendary mountain of the gods, was clearly colored by the contact of Israel with the Babylonians, whose conception of a divine mountain is well expressed in the Babylonian hymn beginning with the words: "O great mountain of Bêl, O stormy mountain, whose summit reaches heaven, whose foundation is laid in the shining deep." Now, it is significant that we have reference only in later literature of the Old Testament to a divine mountain located in the north. Cf. Ezek. 28:14: "I have set thee so thou wast upon the holy mountain of God, thou hast walked up and down in the

midst of stones of fire." The reference is clearer in Job. 37:22: "out of the north cometh splendor, God hath upon him terrible majesty." The same conception appears in Isa., chap. 24, a post-exilic composition; cf. vs. 21: "Yahweh will punish the host of the high on high."

There is apparently still another myth influencing the ode, the use of which is more characteristic of the later prophets. If בֶּן־שָׁחַר, "son of the dawn," vs. 12, is to be relied upon as a correct text, the morning-star is evidently referred to, though we must change הֵילֵל to הֵילָל from הָלָל, "to shine." The fact that the morning-star becomes lost in the splendor of the rising sun is probably reflected in legends about warfare in heaven. The same idea is more fully expressed in some passages of the New Testament and in the teachings of such church fathers as Tertullian and others.

The most important allusion in the ode is to Sheol, the meaning of which is in doubt, although some discussions of Sheol are based on the assumption that the word is from the Assyrian ša'âlu, "make inquiry," and that Sheol signifies "place of investigation." The fact that almost all tombs of primitive times were designed to promote ancestor-worship and the instance of Saul seeking the tomb of the dead for counsel gives support to this assumption. The synonyms that throw light on the use of שְׁאוֹל are בּוֹר, "pit," and תְּהוֹמֵי, "lower place."

The Hebrew Sheol is apparently a duplicate of the Assyrian aralû, "place of the dead," aralû evidently being equal to urugal, "great city." It is very significant that this ode and the poem on the Descent of Ištar to Hades, which gives a clear statement of the Babylonian idea of the dead, are both pentameters. The Babylonian poem represents the place of the dead as a great dwelling located in the lower regions of the world and divided into compartments. The inhabitants are not entirely destitute of life, as their food is dust. Their condition, however, is altogether evil; they are forced to remain in a state of darkness, a land of no return, and their covering is of feathers like that of birds. All classes of life retain their characteristics in this shadowy realm, and thus in some Babylonian representations of the lower world soldiers are depicted there with their weapons of war and kings also wearing their crowns,

just as in our biblical ode, kings may sit on their thrones in Sheol. It should be noted also that in the ode non-burial is looked upon as an undoubted disgrace, a parallel of which is seen in Assyrian literature where the kings in their inscriptions pray that the bodies of their enemies may be cast out without burial, and it is recorded of a king that he actually took the bodies of his enemies by force from their tombs and left them exposed.

It is in accord with the older Hebrew views regarding Sheol that those in the place of the dead have some knowledge of what is happening among the living; thus in the present ode the kings of the nations are raised up from their shadowy thrones and say to the king in question: "thy pomp is brought down to Sheol; [also] the music of thy harps." According to later Hebrew views, those who enter Sheol are in an unconscious state of death; thus in the ode, the personified Sheol awakes the dead; viz., the kings of the earth who sleep each one in his tomb. The present king has already reached a condition in which he lies covered with maggots in a bed of worms. He has been cast out as an abhorred branch; he has been slain with the sword; he is a dead body trodden under foot.

The fifth strophe adds to this an idea which may be slightly elaborated in the Apocrypha. The ode ends with the imprecation that the memory of the king may be blotted out and his seed become extinct. The Apocrypha provides that a man's sins be visited with an evil reputation to the man after death and also by the misfortune of his children; cf. Ecclus. 41:5: "The inheritance of the children of sinners shall perish and their posterity shall have a perpetual reproach."

The question as to the subject of this ode presents some difficulties which cannot be definitely settled. The king referred to was a great warrior and a cruel subjugator of foreign peoples; he laid low the nations; he smote peoples in anger and pursued them without restraint; he made the lands tremble and the kingdoms shake; he turned the world into a wilderness and tore its cities down; the prisoner whom he carried away returned not. This king was one who made the resources of neighboring nations contribute to the wealth of his building operations; and therefore the cypress trees

rejoiced and also the cedars of Lebanon, and the whole earth was at rest when he was cut down. He was also a king who presumptuously emulated the prerogatives of the gods, as he stated that he would place his seat among the stars of God; that he would sit on the mountain of the congregation in the recesses of the north, above the heights of the clouds and make himself the Most High. He was a king who wrought evil against the welfare of his own nation, for he destroyed his own land and slew his people. He was a monarch despised, and his own people desired slaughter for his children, and that the seed of such evil-doers be not named for ever. He therefore did not deserve an honorable burial with his fathers, and he was consequently cast out from his grave as an abhorred branch.

This description undoubtedly fits Sennacherib better than any other king, to whose dynasty the rather harsh title *ḥa bigal* 'pest' (lit. 'great stench') is applied in the Babylonian king list. He was a king who sought to maintain by brute force the dominion handed to him by his father; his hand was a hand of iron and blood. His arrogance was as conspicuous as was the ruin wrought in his vast empire. We know, too, that he died by the hand of an assassin. The sentence in the ode which says "he destroyed his land" might be taken as referring to his wars with the Babylonians and the destruction of Babylon.

In some respects, however, the language seems also to fit Nabonidus. The plundering of forests for building material, the love for retreat and devotion in the presence of the gods, and the subsequent injury to the nation occasioned by such regal neglect and by the imposing of heavy tribute on the people, as well as the dislike in the nation for this monarch, were characteristic of the times at Babylon when the reign of Nabonidus came to an end. The ode might well represent the feeling of the captive Israelites, as the finale of Nabonidus approached.

The purpose of writing the ode can perhaps be readily conjectured. After the exile, the Israelites were undoubtedly compelled to suffer under a rule as objectionable as had been the tyranny of Sennacherib or the more negative oppression of Nabonidus. It was

in this post-exilic time that the ode was written for the purpose of inspiring the Israelites with hope for deliverance from a dominion of which Sennacherib was an antetype. The memory of the reign of Sennacherib, who had left a lasting impression both on Palestine and Babylonia, was the germ for the growth of such a song, which was ornamented with figurative characteristics of that conspicuous king, making of the song a parable. The Song of Moses was certainly not written at the time the Children of Israel crossed the Red Sea. This ode called the "Ode on the King of Babylon" was quite as evidently not composed with reference to any particular Assyrian or Babylonian king. The word "Babylon" does not occur in the ode, nor would one necessarily think of applying the composition to a Babylonian king, except for the connection in which it is placed. When the Book of Isaiah was completed, this ready-made song was inserted, most likely as applying to Nabonidus, a view which appears to be confirmed by the great probability that the book of Isaiah could not have reached its final form earlier than the second century B.C.